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ABSTRACT

Those involved in speech education should restore the study of conversation to the curriculum, both in high school and college. The reasons for teaching interpersonal communication skills are that all students will have to listen to instructions, interview for jobs, and take part in decision-making meetings. Some exercises that can be used to teach interpersonal communication skills include dividing a class into four groups and letting two of the groups list the barriers to conversation they are aware of, while the other two groups list the aids to conversation they have found useful. Another exercise is to have each person write a confidential self-inventory of himself as a conversationalist, mentioning both liabilities and assets. Another session could examine special conversational situations: male-female conversations, talking with the elderly, talking with troubled people, or talking with those whose status poses a barrier. (WR)

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INCLUDING A UNIT IN CONVERSATION IN THE INTRODUCTORY SPEECH COURSE

by
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The word "conversation," used as an adjective to describe the informal, lively, and direct communication which James Winans advocated for public speaking, appears in most contemporary speech textbooks in relation to delivery. Yet we see references to the act of conversation itself very rarely.

As you know, this hasn't always been the case. Twenty years ago, a majority of basic speech textbooks included a chapter on conversation, and we can assume that instructors led discussions of the material. Maybe they even required class performances to illustrate the chapter's principles.

Well, why has the teaching of conversation stopped? Probably because teaching a skill like conversation doesn't seem consistent with the image the speech profession has been trying to foster lately. We have been so intent on correcting the impression that we teach only delivery and precise diction that we steer away from approaches which might make the speech course look insubstantial. Speech teachers tend to put the teaching of conversation in the same negative category as the advice in earlier textbooks on "how to talk over the telephone." Neither activity, we think, appears harmonious with our efforts to prove to our academic brethen that we not only use the behavioral sciences but that, in addition, speech communication is a behavioral science. Instead of dealing with something as mundane as conversation, we prefer to claim familiarity with cognitive dissonance, the semantic differential, standard deviations, and the motivated sequence.

Personally, I believe that eliminating the study of conversation was a serious mistake, even though our motivation might have been somewhat understandable. So I recommend that those of us involved in speech education ought to restore the study of conversation to the curriculum, both in high school and college.

Here are my reasons--

First, if our true concern is interpersonal communication (as we are fond of claiming) how can our courses omit the most frequently used form of person-to-person communication? In defining interpersonal communication for The Speech Teacher, Joseph A. Ilardo stated that "public speaking's emphasis on the one-to-many situation has given way to interpersonal communication's emphasis on the one-to-one and one-to-few situations..." Well, don't "one-to-one" and "one-to-few" refer to conversation as well as to interviewing and small group discussion?

I should add here that conversation is a form of interpersonal communication we do not necessarily teach when we talk about interviewing. Usually, conversation is less structured, more informal, and has a different purpose than the interview.

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A second reason for teaching conversation is that unless speech professionals teach it, we leave the subject in the hands of dozens of correspondence schools, non-credit night courses, and highly publicized public relations groups--whose very existence illustrates widespread interest in improving ability to converse. This means that a vital aspect of communication is being taught almost entirely by people who lack training in the communication principles we habitually extol. Because of our special training, we teach conversation as a part of the total communication matrix, relating it to listening, semantics, audience analysis, nonverbal communication, and other topics. I admit that the teaching of conversation may be conducted unworthily outside our educational system, but there is no good reason why it has to be that way inside, under the direction of qualified speech educators.

Third, let's remember a justification we have used for teaching listening, interviewing, and group discussion. We have argued that while relatively few students will give speeches daily in their professional and social life, all of them will have to listen to instructions, interview for jobs, and take part in decision-making meetings. Then can't we argue for the teaching of conversation on the same basis--even more so? For regardless of one's occupation, his adeptness in conversation will be tested daily, on his job and away from it. I would wonder why it is too much to expect interpersonal communication instructors to provide insights on this recurring verbal activity.

Maybe these reasons sound convincing, but you still wonder what the instructor could include in his unit on conversation. Having taught an eight-session conversation course for adults in an extension program, and having used a conversational unit in my introductory speech course the past two quarters, I have several suggestions to offer.

First, you can begin by dividing the class into four groups. Let two of the groups list the barriers to conversation they are aware of, while the other two groups list the aids to conversation they have found useful. When the groups report their findings to the whole class, the instructor can guide the class in considering how the major principles of communication can help us overcome the barriers.

Another helpful exercise is to have each person write a confidential self-inventory of himself as a conversationalist, mentioning both liabilities and assets. In the next class session, after reading these, you can direct discussion on the proper attitudes conversationalists need to cultivate--toward themselves, toward their conversational partners, and toward the act of conversation itself. Obviously, any quotations you select from the self-analyses to use as illustrations would be cited anonymously.

Still another session could examine special conversational situations: male-female conversations; talking with the elderly; talking with troubled people; or talking with those whose status poses a barrier.

Undoubtedly, the most helpful session I hold revolves around what I call 15 "conversational prompters". These are steps a person can take to prompt his conversational partner. First, I give the students a list of these techniques. For example, two of the techniques are (1) mentioning an event you know he's interested in and asking him to comment (2) asking his advice on something. With the list of 15 techniques before them, the students listen to 15 brief role-playing conversations my colleagues

have taped for me. Then the students are asked, after each role-playing recording, to identify the conversational prompter that was illustrated. This way, they hear the pattern demonstrated, and they have an easier time understanding and remembering it.

Of course, creative teachers can add to these exercises, and can frequently remind the class of the application of communication theories that have already been studied during the term. With just a little imagination, the teaching of conversation can be made both exciting and practical.

Whatever our strategy, we ought to acknowledge that Robert Oliver is right when he says "The way we talk is an index to what we are." Can't speech educators acknowledge that this observation relates to conversation as well as to public speaking, interviewing, and group discussion--that is, acknowledge it by putting what we know and can learn about conversation back into our textbooks and class sessions.